

2022 AAS-in-Asia Symposium

Cultivating the Humanities and Social Sciences:
Addressing the Multiple Marginalities of South and Southeast Asia

8-10 December 2022

UNISERV, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Panel

“Environmental Humanities and Environmental Justice Part 1 & 2”

Organized by

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)
Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Panel description

How might we bridge humanities and social sciences to cultivate environmental humanities and justice in the global south? This panel is an on-going process to co-create spaces and opportunities with emerging humanities and social sciences scholars, especially those based in the Global South. After an intensive five-day workshop, which introduces transformative and transdisciplinary concepts and methods in environmental humanities research, eight panelists have taken the lead to continue. This panel shares six in-progress research to foreground our entangled relations with the marginalized, indigenous, and more-than human beings and entities.

Part 1 focuses on humanities. The first presentation adopts an ecospiritual approach and participatory mapping to explore the spiritual lifeworld of a Karen Po village in Chiang Mai, Thailand amidst a turbulence of a mega-infrastructure that could threaten indigenous ecological reciprocity and spiritual sustenance. The second presentation navigates the same Karen Po village but in the new political media landscapes and the agency of youth in creating possibilities for participatory and networked communications to achieve environmental justice and civic imagination. The third presentation examines hyperobjects such as coloniality and pollution within Kolar Gold Fields (K.G.F.) in Karnataka, India and the artistic outputs depicting what environmental justice is being sought or served for the human and more-than-human occupants.

Part 2 explores politics and the environments. The fourth presentation analyses contesting ontological differences and practices to live and manage the unpredictability of the Ing River in northern Thailand. The fifth presentation highlights resistance and adaptation of Bunong communities to the Lower Sesan II Hydro Dam Project in Steung Treng, Cambodia. The sixth presentation questions environmental justice with urban gardening as space of ontological contestations and collaborations to (in)securitize food in Chiang Mai city.

Keyword: Environmental humanities, participatory, media, justice, collaborations

Panelists

Panelists	Presentation Title
Environmental Humanities and Environmental Justice Part 1 8 December 2022 at 10.30 – 12.00 Discussant: Jakkrit Sangkhamanee (TBC) Department of Sociology and Anthropology Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University	
1. Mankun Liu, PhD Candidate, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong 2. Wasinee S Topoonyanont, Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, Thailand 3. Pranab K Mandal, PhD Candidate, Jadavpur University and Asst. Professor, RKMRC, India	Paper 1 Natureculture and Supernature: Fluidity, Entanglement, and Ecospiritual Loss in Ban Mae Ngud Amidst the Yuam/Salween River Diversion Project
4. Dr Charlotte Hill, Lecturer, Department of Media Arts and Design, Faculty of Fine Arts, Chang Mai University	Paper 2 Re-thinking knowledge production through youth-driven political activism: A case for participatory and networked cultures
5. Dr Lauren Rebecca Clark, Integrative Center for Humanities Innovation, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University	Paper 3 Kolar Gold Fields: Seeking Environmental Humanistic Justice
Environmental Humanities and Environmental Justice Part 2 9 December 2022 at 10.45 – 12.15 Discussant: Chaya Vaddhanaphuti Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University	
6. Thianchai Surimas, PhD Candidate in Graduate Research in International Development (GRID), Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University	Paper 4 Addressing the unpredictable river and the ontological differences of the Ing River, Northern Thailand
7. Soeung Bunly, Svay Tieng University	Paper 5 The Resistance and Adaptation of Bunong Communities to the Lower Sesan II Hydro Dam Project in Steung Treng Province
8. Areeya Tivasuradej, Department of Geography, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University	Paper 6 Thinking Environmental Justice with Chiang Mai Urban Farm

Paper 1

Natureculture and Supernature: Fluidity, Entanglement, and Ecospiritual Loss in Ban Mae Ngud Amidst the Yuam/Salween River Diversion Project

Mankun Liu, PhD Candidate, City University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

Wasinee S Topoonyanont, Lecturer, Faculty of Humanities, Chiang Mai University, Thailand

Pranab K Mandal, PhD Candidate, Jadavpur University and Asst. Professor, RKMRC, India

*All are first authors

Abstract

As the current evaluation of the environmental impacts of infrastructure building schemes is dominated by scientific methods, the communal, psychological, and emotional risks these schemes may pose on marginalized communities are often difficult to estimate and therefore neglected. With an ecospiritual approach to environmental sustainability, this paper argues that the destruction of forest and riverine ecology in the process of infrastructure building essentially threatens the ecological reciprocity and spiritual sustenance of an indigenous community. Methodologically, it brings environmental humanities into this discussion by foregrounding the sociopolitical and ecocultural purchase of indigenous spiritual practices and cosmo-visions in the debate over indigenous entitlement to environmental stewardship. This approach is explored through a case study of the spiritual lifeworld of Ban Mae Ngud, a Karen Pow village in Chiang Mai, Thailand. Their livelihood is currently facing imminent ecological turbulence following the Yuam/Salween Water Diversion Project. We adopted site visits, semi-structured interviews, focused group interviews, participatory map-making, and post-fieldwork communications as the main methods for collecting narrative accounts of the village's spiritual world and ritual practices, which constitute our basic text of analysis. Instead of treating these narratives as representations of a static ontology, our analysis highlights the fluidity and patchiness of the hybrid spiritual practices of Ban Mae Ngud. By tracing the cosmological and historical roots of the spiritual systems of the village, it foregrounds the spiritual practices as the community's way of sustaining ethnocultural identity, environmental sovereignty, and ecological ethics amidst forced relocation and constant readaptation. This integrity of the native lifeworld, which knows no division between nature and culture, is especially perceptible to infrastructure schemes for indigenous spiritual practices that essentially depend on the interactions with the material landscape. Based on this, this study suggests that environmental impact assessments cannot be solely based on the examination of nature as a scientific subject.

Keywords: Natureculture, ecosprituallity, ethnocultural identity, indigenous environmental justice, place potency

Paper 2

Re-thinking knowledge production through youth-driven political activism: A case for participatory and networked cultures

Dr Charlotte Hill

Lecturer, Department of Media Arts and Design
Faculty of Fine Arts, Chang Mai University

Abstract

Youth-driven political activism is not a new phenomenon in Thailand. As Henry Jenkins (2015) contends, “youth are uniquely positioned to effect social change”, yet in 2019, UNICEF stated that in Thai society the voices of young people are almost always dismissed or ignored. This working paper draws from the learnings from the 2022 “Indigenous & More-Than-Human Ecological Justice” workshop and initial fieldsite observations in Ban Mae Ngud, a village in the north of Thailand fighting for environmental justice and social and political recognition. This research explores through a gendered lens the concept of participatory culture in the context of environmental justice and youth protest and argues that young women in Thailand are active leaders in adopting a mobile socio-technical approach to mediating political agency. I contend that for communities like Ban Mae Ngud to achieve political reform, environmental justice and civic imagination, the elders must engage fully with youth participatory and networked cultures.

Keyword: Participatory culture, networked communication, environmental justice, youth political agency, new political media landscapes.

Paper 3

Kolar Gold Fields: Seeking Environmental Humanistic Justice

Dr Lauren Rebecca Clark

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Abstract

Considered Little England in the 1890s, Kolar Gold Fields (K.G.F.), Karnataka, was a site of environmental and social degradation throughout its operation and especially after the sudden closure of the mines in 2001. Upon India's independence, John Taylor & Sons left, and the goldmines were nationalized by Bharat Gold Mines Limited in 1956. Environmental and social injustices are apparent throughout the mines' legacy.

First electrified in 1902 and with an artificial lake providing drinking water, K.G.F.'s residents today report a lackluster scene: no power supply nor drinking water (Kajal, 2020) as well as open drains, land, and water contamination. Dilapidating colonial buildings stand testament to the past. Covid-19 marginalized K.G.F.'s locals further when public transport restricted their commute to the nearest city Bangalore. Cyanide and silica mounds dumped there are provoking air and water pollution, impacting the health of residents.

K.G.F. also has a neglected artistic heritage. It is the homeland of Tamil writers, Telugu writers, Anglo-Indian writers, and visual artists. Two Kannada-language action films directed by Prashanth Neel and produced by Vijay Kiragandur brought a spotlight on the goldmine recently: K.G.F.: Chapter 1 (2018) and K.G.F.: Chapter 2 (2022).

While the case for capital-colonialism in K.G.F is apparent, the jury is out on the links between humanistic knowledge and environmental justice. This paper asks whether apriori methodological approaches are useful to understand "hyperobjects" (Morton, 2013) such as coloniality and pollution within K.G.F. An examination of the objects themselves and artistic output depicting the struggle for environmental justice of K.G.F. will be presented. This paper draws on cultural, historical, and environmental data from the site as well as select artistic works to determine to what extent justice is being sought or served. It will establish how humanistic output is instrumental in seeking environmental justice in K.G.F. for its human and more-than-human occupants.

Keyword: Environmental Justice, K.G.F., Pollution, Coloniality, Environmental Humanities

Paper 4

Addressing the unpredictable river and the ontological differences of the Ing River, Northern Thailand

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Abstract

In recent years, water shortages have become the main problem threatening humans and other beings and also generating water-related conflicts in the Ing River basin. Previous studies have highlighted how water-related conflicts reveal multiple water ontologies and their coexistence, also reflecting how modern ontology dominates water governance. This study found that the main ontological characteristics of water, revealed from the network that has been politically contested, is a source of life but unpredictable, in a form of drought and water shortages. These characteristics mobilize all networks to organize water-related practices to overcome the unpredictability and these practices reflect different water ontologies that each network hold and share. Therefore, socio-material practices related to the unpredictable water show ontological differences in the Ing River. On the one hand, the RID-led network enacted Modern Water or Water as a Resource, so they made a master plan by experts to control the flow and store water through hydraulic infrastructures, build modern irrigation schemes, and implement Joint Management Committee to manage water. The unpredictable water could be fixed by scientific knowledge, which considers water as neutral H₂O and recognizes only physical dimensions and dismissed social and cultural dimensions of water. On the other hand, the civil society and community-led network consider water as Living Water, which maintains the value of water as a resource to sustain local economies but also recognises cultural and social values. This network addresses the unpredictability through religious and cultural ceremonies, ghost and spirit worship, and local knowledge. Through a hydrosocial lens, this article argues that the RID-led network rests in the western ontology that nature and society are divided, but local practices show water embedded in social, cultural, religious and beliefs, which suggested that water and society are not distinct and challenging the modernist ontology of water.

Keyword: unpredictability, modern water, living water, water ontologies, water-society relations

Paper 5

**The Resistance and Adaptation of Bunong Communities to the Lower Sesan II Hydro Dam
Project in Steung Treng Province**

**Soeung Bunly
Svay Tieng University**

Abstract to submit

Paper 6

Thinking Environmental Justice with Chiang Mai Urban Farm

Areeya Tivasuradej

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Abstract

“Can’t they see that the vegetables are growing?” answered the woman Akha grower who has been one of the longest-caring growers at the Chiang Mai Urban Farm. She looked vastly to the lettuces, beans, eggplants, and chilies growing. This was her response when I told her that many people asked about the dumpsite under the edible garden and the fear for toxicity in food. Her response prompts me to critically think about environmental justice (Pellow 2017) amidst the human-plant place-making relationships at an edible garden in urban Chiang Mai that recently emerged during the pandemic in 2020. Different gardening practices—from municipal city plan, architectural designs, hilltribe Akha gardeners’ hands, and plants rooting—help transform a garbage dumpsite into a fertile dumped soil plot. These entangled acts and worldings might pose a possibility to access state-owned land and securitize food in our everyday lives. Yet, following Head et al. 2017’s call to geographers to attend to ‘vegetal politics,’ as I dwell and do things with growers and Chiang Mai Urban Farm, embedded inequality in the city and the challenges of aesthetic and nostalgic values dominant in Thai urban elite and middle class persist to insecure food and justice and silence toxicity in the city.

Reference

- Head, Lesley, Jennifer Atchison, Catherine Phillips, and Kathleen Buckingham, eds. 2017. *Vegetal Politics*. Routledge.
- Pellow, D.N., 2017. *What is critical environmental justice?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Keyword: Environmental justice, food security, urban, placemaking, toxicity